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CASTRO, Fidel

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Plot Disclosure Made CIA Squirm

It has taken 12 years to get the reaction of the Central Intelligence Agency to our stories on its recruitment of Mafia mobsters to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

Working under the late Drew Pearson, I produced two columns, dated March 3 and March 7, 1967, on the plot to kill Castro. CIA officials grimly refused to comment.

But President Lyndon Johnson demanded a full report from the CIA after he read our stories. We have obtained a still-secret report by the CIA's inspector general that confirmed the essentials of the columns, conceded that the disclosures had caused "much distress" at the spy agency, and discussed the ways in which the government could minimize the embarrassment.

"Drew Pearson's column of March 7, 1967 refers to a reported CIA plot in 1963 to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro," the inspector general wrote. "Pearson also has information, as yet unpublished, to the effect that there was a meeting at the State Department at which assassination of Castro was discussed, and that a team (of three men) actually landed in Cuba with (poison) pills to be used in an assassination attempt."

The report then says: "There is a basis in fact for each of those three reports."

In light of this uncomfortable accuracy, the inspector general asks: "Can we plausibly deny that we plotted with gangster elements to assassinate Castro?"

And the answer: "No. We cannot. We are reasonably confident that there is nothing in writing outside the government that would confirm Pearson's story of the operation, but there are plenty of non-gangster witnesses who could lend confirmation."

Well then, the inspector general asks, "Can CIA state or imply that it was merely an instrument of policy?" In other words, could the spooks pass the buck to the martyred President Kennedy?

"Not in this case," the report decides: "While it was true that (the later phase of the plots) was carried out in an atmosphere of intense Kennedy administration pressure to do something about Castro, such is not true of the earlier phase. (It) was initiated in August 1960 under the Eisenhower administration."

The inspector general also concluded that the Castro assassination project could not be fobbed off as just a practice maneuver—part of the "Executive Action Capability" being developed by the CIA's clandestine operations arm.

It is still not known whether this "capability" program, code-named with ominous prescience "ZR-RIFLE," was requested by the Kennedy administration or developed by the CIA on its own.

Our stories raised the question whether then-attorney general Robert Kennedy had approved the assassination plot. The secret report confirmed only that Kennedy "was fully briefed" on May 7, 1962. "A memorandum con-

firmed the oral briefing was forwarded to Kennedy on 14 May 1962 . . . The memorandum does not use the word 'assassinate,' but there is little room for misinterpretation of what was meant."

But the inspector general stressed that Kennedy was told only about the first phase of the mobster-recruitment program. He was not told about the second phase, "which was well under way at the time (he) was briefed."

A further reason the Kennedys couldn't be saddled with blame for the plots was that a key ingredient mentioned in our column was not known to the president and his brother: "The Pearson story, which is causing us so much distress, includes one detail that is found only in Phase Two: the three-man team." If the CIA tried to foist responsibility onto the Kennedys, the sources who told us about the three-man team could easily point out that the agency was lying.

"What measures might be taken to lessen the damage?" the rhetorically curious inspector general asks. A classic cover-up was discarded as impractical.

"We cannot now suppress the story because it is already out," he concluded. "If we were to approach any of the participants and urge discretion upon him, and if this became known, it would merely lend credence to a tale that now sounds somewhat improbable."

So the agency maintained a stone wall of silence.